

# Incarnational ministry: a critical examination

by Harriet Hill

This popular model is open to serious question when stacked up against field realities.

**I**ncarnational ministry: everybody talks about it, but what is it, and does it work? The Brewsters described it as proclaiming "I belong to Jesus who has given me a new kind of life. By my becoming a believer here with you, God is inviting you through me to belong to him."

The missionary's task thus parallels the incarnation model established by Jesus who left heaven, where he belonged, and became a believer with humankind in order to draw people into a belonging relationship with God.<sup>1</sup>

Incarnational ministry means becoming one with the people. Following this model, missionaries should be an incarnation of God to their receptors in their cultural setting, like Jesus was to the first century Jews. During my years of preparation, I got the impression that the only hindrance to fulfilling this model was the lack of dedication among missionaries to carry it out.

So, I gladly adopted this model. We lived in a rural village and I dreamed of becoming one with the people. I learned their language, tried to carry water on my head but couldn't, washed our clothes like they did and generated howls of laughter for my efforts, and dressed like they did. As much as my family and stamina allowed, I tried to be a cultural insider.

But I failed miserably. Even after years of trying, vast differences remained. The model that sounded so wonderful in my missions classes wasn't working for me, but rather than question the model, I assumed the problem was myself. I was doing something wrong, I was failing God, and guilt overwhelmed me. Not only that, my children also suffered because when they needed stability, I was frantically changing things to achieve an incarnational ministry.

Only later did I discover Jacob Loewen's article, "Roles: Relating to an Alien Social Structure," in which he discusses insider and outsider roles, the advantages and disadvantages of each.<sup>2</sup>

Probably because missionary candidates in recent years have been exposed to such a strong emphasis on total identification with the members of the target culture, many have felt that such insider roles were the absolute must. Since such role assignments were supposedly based on identification, they assumed that becoming an insider was merely a matter of having the right attitudes: he who achieves victory over his own ethnocentrism will automatically receive an insider's role as "crown."

Loewen sees dangers in assuming insider roles. At first, the people will understand and overlook the missionary's faults. As time wears on, however, they will expect us to act in a culturally appropriate way, assuming that we know more of their language and culture than we really do. Loewen himself has used insider roles in his ministry, but only if he knew his contact would be brief. In one case, he was "adopted" as a son.

Had I been a son over an extended period of time, what would I have done if my father had chosen a wife for me? . . . Had I remained for a longer period, or even permanently, I would have had to live up to the expected behavior of a son, or run the risk of being labeled a reprobate. One can readily foresee how quickly I would have found myself unable or unwilling to meet the expectations and thereby destroy not only this relationship, but my very credibility.<sup>3</sup>

Loewen discusses other negative repercussions of assuming an insider role: (1) There are financial and emotional limitations. We all have a threshold of emotional stress beyond which we cannot function. (2) Aligning oneself with any one group too closely automatically



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eliminates intimacy with all others. As an insider, one is often expected to defend his or her own group, even if they are in the wrong. (3) By claiming we are insiders when we really aren't, we can give the impression of being dishonest. (4) Even when we feel we are living simply, we have too much stuff to be a genuine insider. (5) What about our absences and furloughs? Loewen counsels: "The person who wants to become a true insider needs to recognize that unless he turns away more or less completely from his own culture and people, he is bound to create serious, if not insurmountable conflict."<sup>4</sup>

So, we need to ask some hard questions about the incarnational model: Is it realistic? Is it honest? Is it suitable for the long haul? Is it appreciated? Then I would like to make a modest proposal.

### Is it realistic?

I recently talked to a couple who were trying to identify with the people and assume an insider role. They lived on the level of the villagers, even though this brought discomfort, stress, and health problems. They tried to convince the villagers that they were not rich; they just wanted to be one with them. However, their model crashed when their newborn became ill and they rushed him home to the States for treatment. No villager would have had that option. They could not follow the model to its logical end, therefore, I say it's an unrealistic model.

My husband and I are Bible translators. If we really followed the incarnational model, we would never be able to do the work we came to do. If I'm out in the rice field all day year around, living like a villager does, I'm not going to get much translation done. To do the work I came to do, I must be different.

In the book, *City of Joy*, a Polish priest becomes one with the poor of Calcutta. He lived in a hovel, ate the same food as the poor ate, and applied for Indian citizenship. He was celibate, so he had no dependents to care for. He never left the slums for seminars, furloughs, or medical care. He came as close as he could to being an incarnation of Christ to these people; he was a genuine insider.

However, I don't see our missions allowing this type of ministry. We do not require celibacy; we do not apply for citizenship; we leave the community regularly for various reasons. To talk about incarnational ministry when our structures preclude the possibility is not realistic.

### Is it honest?

I was brought up in a relatively tight community of Dutch immigrants in Southern California. A person could not show up and become part of this community overnight. It took many years of appropriate behavior to be accepted. If this is true in a cultural enclave in Southern California, what about an African village? In our village, for example, all the women came together to prepare food for the feasts and they found real camaraderie as they laughed and had fun together. However, I soon discovered a subtle distinction among them. Off to the side by themselves was another group of women preparing food; they had married into the village from other ethnic groups. Although they had spent much of their adult lives in the village, bore their children there, and probably would die there, still they were outsiders.

Enter the incarnational missionaries. We have no intention of spending the rest of our lives there. We don't intend to marry a villager, or have our children marry a villager. We keep leaving, for a week, a month, a year. Yet we talk this "incarnational" talk. We must seem dishonest to the villagers. To say that we are one with them is hypocritical. Loewen is alarmed at "how easily missionaries can deceive themselves into thinking they are cultural insiders and that they are totally committed to the people they serve."<sup>5</sup>

We rejoice when the people give us kin names. "They've adopted us!" we exclaim, thinking we are truly accepted. Aren't these kin names symbolic, a token of friendship? If they are more than symbolic, we run into the problems of expectations of the kin group that Loewen addresses.

I'm all for being like Jesus, but I find some significant differences between his ministry and mine. He was born into his receptor group as a baby; I came at the age of 28. He spoke the receptor language as his mother tongue and was enculturated into the receptor culture. I fumble along, and might never be able to pronounce some African vowels correctly. He didn't have to take furloughs back to heaven every four years for rest and recuperation. He had no need to prepare children to go off and live in his source culture at the age of 18. Under this model, either we deceive ourselves into believing we're insiders when we're really not, or we carry a load of guilt for not succeeding.

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### Is it suitable for the long haul?

As missionaries, we are in this for the long haul. We are not anthropologists out on a six-months research project. For translators especially, if we can't see a translation through to publication, we have accomplished little. We need to develop a life style that we can maintain over the years for ourselves and our families.

Many of us are parents and one of our tasks is to help our children know who they are and how they fit. We cannot live in isolation. We are social creatures and need companionship and interaction. If we propagate the myth that we are one with our villagers, when we're really not, what identity will our children have? Where will they fit in? Will they perceive of themselves as Africans, which they clearly are not, or as Americans who know nothing about American customs and life style? Or will they be rather isolated? Where will they feel comfortable? Will there be any place where they feel comfortable socially?

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### Is it appreciated?

I was surprised by the reaction of our villagers to our incarnational mentality. One day a man told my husband he was selfish. He was shocked and tried to think what he had done to deserve that judgment. They explained that he was selfish because he could do something to improve the village, like build a big fancy house in which the villagers could take pride. Instead, he had come and lived like they did in one of their houses.

They wanted us to help them make progress in the world. They could only interpret as selfishness our refusal to do what we could to improve things in the village. We knew a better way to live, but didn't share it with them.

### A proposal

Very little in life is lived at the extremes. Usually, we are somewhere in between. The incarnational model of ministry no doubt drew wide interest as part of a reaction against the missionary compound mentality. Certainly, it's an improvement over that, but taken to extremes, it is neither workable nor desirable.

Knowing your identity is fundamental to your mental and emotional health. We must give serious thought to our identity as missionaries. The role I have selected in relation to our villagers is their friend. No, I am not one of them: they knew that all along. My differences are obvi-

ous. But I am a friend; I love them in Jesus' name, I try to understand them, I care about them, I am polite. They accept me and my family as we are.

This role feels so much more honest to me. I am not pretending or claiming to be someone I am not. I don't need to deny who I am. The load of guilt is lifted.

My life style and my role are consistent; I am not saying one thing and then doing something else when a problem arises. I can still dress the way they dress if I choose, but now it's for a different reason: a sign of acceptance, almost for fun. I can also dress the way I'm most comfortable, without guilt. Most of all, by honestly knowing my own identity, I can help my children to discover theirs.

Although Jesus took on our humanity, he still used his power to feed multitudes. As a friend, I can fully use my God-given place in life. I can ask God for understanding about how to best serve those around me.

Things are changing so fast in African villages that it seems like everything is in flux. One African put it this way: "We have our feet in the Stone Age, while our heads spin in the atoms—we haven't found our bodies yet." As a friend, perhaps I can be of some help to my village friends during this turbulent time of change. They, in turn, can help me to understand their world. We can both use who we are and what we know to the maximum.

If we do continue to hold up the incarnational model, we should at the same time suggest some drastic changes in our Protestant mission structures, so that our walk matches our talk. On the other hand, if after questioning the model, we find that the insider role is not the most desirable one, we should not talk like it is.

My plea, especially to our missions professors, is to think carefully about the model being proposed to students. Is it realistic? Is it honest? Is it good for the long haul? Does it really work? Will it be appreciated? The first years on the field are tough enough, without trying to use an inadequate model.

### END NOTES

1. Thomas E. and Elizabeth S. Brewster, *Bending and the Missionary Task* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1982), pp. 6, 7.
2. Jacob A. Loewen, "Roles: Relating to an Allen Social Structure," *Missiology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April, 1976, p. 219.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
6. Michael and Aubline Kirtley, "The Ivory Coast—African Success Story," *National Geographic*, July, 1982, p. 100.

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